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Edward Said, Music and Culture Studies

...K.W.Christopher

Music has always been an important part of Said's life and work. As Daniel Barenboim, the renowned Israeli pianist and conductor and a close friend of Said remarked: "Said was many things to many people, but in reality, his was a musician's soul, in the deepest sense of the word" Said's work in the area of, what is called postcolonial theory, is much discussed and debated but his seminal work on Western classical music as a cultural field has not generated much enthusiasm among cultural studies practitioners. In fact Said himself bemoans the lack of interest in music among people doing cultural studies, as to how "Music criticism and musicology, as well as the worlds of performance and composition, are strikingly removed from the main fields of cultural criticism"[2]

Some view Said's engagement with Western Classical music rather than with "popular music" as an evidence of his high brow "western liberal humanism". Robert Irwin comments: Said worked confidently with the conventional canon of great literary works, as they featured on the reading lists of literature departments of American universities. In 1978 Harold Bloom had yet to publish on the subject, yet of course the canon already existed. Said's predilection for the

classics of Western literature was paralleled by his enthusiasm for Bach, Mozart and other great composers of western classical music. Apart from hostile essays on the singer Umm Kulthum and the belly dancer Tahia Carioca (both Egyptians), his neglect of popular culture was fairly comprehensive[3].

The reason for such an evasion of Said's work on music could be because music is a forbidding domain not accessible for glib generalization and theorizing .It demands a rigorous training and a musician's ear. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that no cultural theorist after Theodor Adorno has demonstrated a serious engagement with music the way Said did. Adorno and Said have so many things in common and in fact Said's aesthetic is a sort of response to Adorno. Adorno was a trained composer who studied with Alban Berg (a student of Arnold Schoenberg) and composed pieces like *Kompositionen* and *Works for String Quartet* (with Hans Essler).His understanding of music was first hand and profound. Adorno's aesthetic is invariably shaped by his musical analysis and it is impossible to separate the musical and the theoretical in his work. Said like Adorno was a trained musician .He was an accomplished pianist and was music critic for The Nation for over two decades.

Said's music criticism is not incidental to but an integral part of his cultural theory very much like that of Adorno .As Katherine Fry observes: "Said's reflections on music do not simply retreat from social and political

concerns, but rather elaborate a utopian thinking regarding the interface between criticism and the aesthetic"[4]

Said started learning music at a very early age. The Cairo of Said's childhood had an opera season during which legendary artists and conductors performed and this ambience of music and opera had a lasting influence on his musical sensibility. In Cairo he studied piano with a Jewish teacher and while at Princeton studied under Paul Tiegerman. However, as Said confesses, a career in music seemed too taxing at that point of time. But the engagement with music lasted all his life -significantly his last work *On Late Style* (published posthumously, 2006) was on music and literature.

Said effectively used musical analogy in his study of literature and culture (The only other theorist who used musical analogy with great creativity was perhaps M M Bakhtin who used polyphony in his study of the novel form) Said's formulation "contrapuntal reading" has become a commonplace of postcolonial criticism. Counterpoint is one of the distinguishing features of western classical music. Unlike Indian classical music (either Carnatic or Hindustani style) where the melody is a sequence of notes- point (note) after point-western classical music in its post 14th century form is essentially polyphonic based on the notions of harmony and counterpoint. Counterpoint derives from the expression punctus contra punctum when translated -point against point or "note against note". It refers to the ability of a

musical composition to say two or more things at once or a "combination of simultaneous parts or voices, each of significance in itself, and the whole resulting in a coherent texture."^[5] Counterpoint is not something secondary (like a background) but is a constitutive element of the musical whole. By extending the vocabulary of music to the study of culture, Said wants us to realize that European culture is not about Europe exclusively but is product of various interactions (historically conditioned) with other cultures. The role of a contrapuntal critic is to restore the voice(s) or narrative - the counterpoint- that has been suppressed.

Like Raymond Williams who preferred to discuss literature in society (not literature and society) Said talks of music in society. His entire oeuvre is interspersed with references to music. The situatedness of music is explored in great detail in Said's re-reading of Verdi's opera *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism*. He says that "*Aida* does great many things for and in European culture, one of which is to confirm the Orient as an essentially exotic, distant, and antique place in which Europeans can mount certain shows of force"⁶ Unlike other Verdi's operas *Aida* strikes as strange, inconsistent "radically impure" and "false", yet these disparities and discrepancies are ignored by musicologists. Said's ingenuity lies in accounting for the formal and technical complexities of the opera in terms of the contexts of its production and not merely relating it to some pre-existing "background". Said states that "A full contrapuntal

appreciation of Aida reveals a structure of reference and attitude, a web of affiliations, connections, decisions, and collaborations, which can be read as leaving a set of ghostly notations in the opera's visual and musical text" [7].

Aida for Said epitomizes the West's subjugation of the "other". Verdi never visited Egypt, thought it was unnecessary and went on to compose an opera about Egypt using the "knowledge" produced by scholars who accompanied a victorious Napoleon to Egypt. The setting of *Aida* is ancient Egypt where Ethiopia represents the colonized and Egypt an imperial power in Africa. Said sees in the triangular love story of Rhadames, Amneris and Aida a 19th century imperial rivalry involving Britain, France and Egypt[8]. However Said's reading is sometimes misleading[9]. In his several observations on Egypt he "Orientalizes" it as something eternal and unchanging and essentially Islamic. In fact Said rarely conceives of a pre Islamic Egypt and this is a serious lacuna in his work. He seems to make no distinction between Pharaonic Egypt and Ismail Khedive's Egypt. Though one has number of reasons to disagree with Said on his selective use of sources regarding the production of *Aida* the method by which he weaves the historical, political and musical strands into a compelling argument is remarkable. Strangely Said ignores the social aspect of music in his analysis of composers like Wagner and Strauss who were in different ways identified with the Nazi regime. Said is selective in his treatment of the opera as a cultural field. He

does not give much attention and in some cases no attention at all,to works related to the east .For instance Gustav Holst's use of orientalist sources in his operas Savitri and Sita or Puccini's orientalist Madam Butterfly do not receive much attention in Said's discussion.

Musical Elaborations and *On Late Style* are Said's seminal writings on music though there are musical allusions scattered in almost all of his work.*Parallels and Paradoxes* with Daniel Barenboim and his posthumously published collection of music criticism *Music at the Limits* are not unified by any specific theme but are loose and scattered.

Said explores the worldliness of music in greater detail in *Musical Elaborations* (Wellek Library Lectures) In a way it is an extension of the argument about worldliness which he makes in *The World the Text and the Critic*. He makes use of Gramsci's formulation of elaboration. "By elaboration Gramsci means two seemingly contradictory but actually complementary things. First, to elaborate means to refine, to work out (e-laborare) some prior or more powerful idea, to perpetuate a world-view. Second, to elaborate means something more qualitatively positive, the proposition that culture itself or thought or art is a highly complex and quasi-autonomous extension of political reality and (. . .) has a density, complexity, and historical-semantic value that is so strong as to make politics possible"[10].

Music "elaborates" a social order in the sense that it

helps in the production of civil society. Said argues that music like all other cultural practices inhabits social space yet it is somehow treated as a special domain, as something removed from the worldly. The notion that music is the most abstract and pure of all art forms has rarely been contested; on the contrary, various musicologists have lent authority to that notion by ignoring the social and ideological aspects of music, or in some cases considered them to be extraneous to music. He argues that music should be studied in much the same way as other disciplines. The recent developments in theories concerning the interpretation of texts should be extended to musical studies. Said argues that "when even the most hermetic and specialized writers like Joyce and Mallarmé are accessible to ideological or psycho-analytic analysis of a far from crudely reductionist kind, there is no reason to exclude music from similar scrutiny"[11].

Said, using Williams paradigm of "literature in society", sees music as taking place in society, as happening with other social processes. He sees it as related in complex ways to institutions, authority and power. Said argues that music has to be read in relation to social privilege, nationalism, religion and the culture industry. Said makes it clear that his intention is not to denigrate musicology but to reinscribe music in its worldliness.

Scholars of music, says Said, "in studying a composer's note books or the written structure of classical form, fail to connect those things to ideology, or social space,

or power, or to the form of an individual ego"[12]. Said finds Theodor Adorno's work as a single exception and acknowledges its influence (Said professed that he was the "only true follower of Adorno") However he rejects his totalizing pessimistic and somewhat deterministic approach to music (seen more in his *Philosophy of New Music* and *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*) One important distinction between Said and Adorno is their relation to Western classical music. Adorno is an insider in the sense that he is a product of the society that produced the music and also the context of the holocaust where as Said is an outsider engaged with the "other". Adorno's cynicism and pessimism is influenced by the events in Germany during the 40s.

One of Said's key formulations about music is the concert as an "event." Making use of Adorno's concept of culture industry and "regression of hearing" to situate performance in society, he describes concert as a significant social event. A concert, in his formulation is never an isolated event it is to a large extent, shaped by the culture industry. It is, in Said's formulation, a paradoxical event at once private (subjective) and social. The logic of culture industry is commodification and fetishization. Extending Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis Said demonstrates how the complete professionalization of performance and the disappearance of the amateur make the concert an unattainable unrepeatable event. The audience is forced into passivity which is one of

telling aspects of culture industry. Citing the example of the Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini's renderings of Chopin's *Etudes*, Said says that the Etudes originally written as aids to teaching keyboard technique are transformed in Pollini's performance into something impossible and unattainable. Thus the concert becomes an "extreme occasion" where the unattainable becomes actual in the magical hands of a "professional" (like Pollini). It has the distancing and alienating effect that Adorno speaks of .It is something "beyond the everyday ,something irreducibly and temporally not repeatable, something whose core is precisely what can be experienced only under relatively severe and unyielding conditions"[13]. So the concert in a way functions on a debilitating division of labour among performers ,listeners and composers .It rarefies music ,makes it unproducible and unrepeatable there by making the music industry possible.

Said further says that:

Performances of Western classical music are therefore highly

concentrated, rarefied and extreme occasions, they have a commercial rationale that is connected, not just to selling tickets and booking tours,but also to selling records for the benefit of large corporations.Above all , the concert occasion itself is the result of a complex historical and social process[14].

Though music is socially and politically situated, its relation with other social practices cannot be defined the way

the relationship between literature and society is characterized.

Literature is more amenable to interpretation in terms of ideology and history because words in a text share a common discursivity with other practices but a musical score does not- hence the difficulty of situating music in its social context. As Leonard Bernstein demonstrates in his Norton Lectures at Harvard there is no way one can explain the effect of minor scale on the listener. Why does a passage in minor strike us sad or reflective or mournful .¹⁵ Surely the ideological explanation does not help us. For instance Schiller's "Ode to Joy", which Beethoven uses in his "Choral" or Ninth Symphony, can be easily read in terms of the ideological or the social, whereas Beethoven's music is not so easily lend itself to such an analysis. Wagner's essay "Das Judethum in der Musik" (Judaism in Music) clearly reveals his anti-Semitism, but his opera *Die Meistersinger* (repeatedly used in Nazi propaganda) does not, though Wagner scholars like Barry Millington see the portrayal of the antagonist character Beckmesser as a reflection of Wagner's anti-Semitism. On the other hand Wagner's operatic treatment of "the Flying Dutchman" and Parsifal has echoes of the wandering Jew.¹⁶

The problem of discussing music in terms of the social is epitomized in the case of Wagner. Wagner is a great name in Western classical music who revolutionized the concept of opera and theater and contributed ten great

operas. A great musician who also happened to be a vehement anti Semitic. How does one separate his music from his anti Semitism? Said says "The challenge he presents, not just to Israeli Jews but to everyone, is how to admire and perform his music on the one hand and, on the other hand, to separate from that his odious writings and the use made of them by the Nazis"[17]. Critics attribute anti Semitism to some of the characters in Wagner's works but this can according to Said "only be imputations of anti Semitism, not instances of it"[18].

In his discussion of Wagner Said does not show how music "elaborates" the social on the contrary he gives in to the traditional argument of music as a pure art form. Wagner the musician and Wagner the individual are two different things. Wagner's views about the Jews do not enter his music. Such a neat compartmentalization contradicts Said's musical aesthetic. Said says "Music as an art form is not like language: notes don't mean something stable, the way a word like "cat" or "horse" does...although I would argue that the context and traditions of individual works of music have to be understood for purposes of true comprehension and interpretation. In some ways music is like algebra..."¹⁹. Said does not absolve Wagner from anti Semitism but absolves his music. *Die Meistersinger* is an instance of transgression according to Said. *Die Meistersinger* transgresses despite Wagner's attempt to closure. "Read and heard for the bristling tremendously energetic power of the alternatives to

its own affirmative proclamations about the greatness of German art and culture, *Die Meistersinger* cannot really be reduced to the nationalist ideology its final strophes stress. It has set forth too much in the way of contrapuntal action, character, invention"[20]. Wagner's case demonstrates the complexity of studying music as a cultural field and also the dangers of reductionism in cultural studies.

Said's critics fail to see the complexity in his observations .Wagner and Strauss cannot be simply condemned because the ambivalent relation with the Third Reich. Wilhelm Furtwangler faced a virtual boycott from Jewish musicians for his decision to remain and perform in Nazi Germany. It was Yehudi Menuhin was the only one who broke this taboo and performed with Furtwangler.

Said lifts music from its rarefied elevation and brings it to its worldliness. Unlike Adorno for whom music was nostalgia, a thing of past Said brings it into contemporary politics. As a Palestinian intellectual and activist he brings in music into the troubled Jewish Palestinian political space. The West Eastern Divan Orchestra comprising young Arab and Jewish musicians was initiated by Said and Daniel Barenboim as an act of transgression, to defy the reifying of people into "us" and "other". The musicians belonging to communities engaged in a prolonged conflict in history, in their performance challenge the stereotypical images of their respective identities.

Said reinscribed music in to its worldliness at the

same time he believed and acknowledged in its power to defy, to transgress, and also heal. Utopian imagination, for Said, was still possible in music.²¹ To understand music is to understand the "other".

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